

Garry Linnell, *Football Ltd: The Inside Story of the AFL*. Ironbark, Sydney, 1995. Illus. pp. xxii + 393. \$17.95.

The subtitle of Garry Linnell's book, *The Inside Story of the AFL*, indicates both the style and subject matter of his book *Football Ltd*. Linnell is a Melbourne sporting journalist and he has been reporting on Australian football during the period of its greatest transformation. This book covers the 1980s and early 1990s when the VFL (now AFL) grew from a suburban competition to a national competition generating a turnover of almost \$150 million.

The book is very definitely a work of journalism. It derives both its strengths and weaknesses from this fact. Linnell's principal sources are about eighty interviews mostly conducted in 1994, and a series of reports. He has managed to interview most of the key figures involved with the transformation of the VFL to AFL; VFL commissioners, club officials, former club owners, Players' Association presidents and former Victorian Premier John Cain. He has, as the subtitle implies, been told many of the stories and deals that have previously not been published. But nothing is footnoted or sourced beyond the text and each chapter is referenced merely by a list of interviewees.

On the other hand, it is a rattling good yarn and Linnell is a very good writer. Linnell tells the story of the business side of football, not as a dull collection of balance sheets and economic analysis, but as a human drama of clashing egos, manipulative magnates, glorious failures and bemused battlers watching their traditional Saturday pastime change beyond recognition.

We are shown Ron Joseph, the teenage (South Melbourne) Swans' fan who put decades of his life into reviving North Melbourne but was also called upon to help save the (Sydney) Swans when private ownership failed. There is also the story of Ross Oakley, who missed St Kilda's Grand Final success because he had injured his knee the previous week and was left out of the Premiership team photograph. Twenty years later he was appointed to the most powerful position ever in Australian football. Ranald Macdonald put in \$60 000 of his own money to meet Melbourne's demand for a \$180 000 transfer fee for Glen McLean after the Collingwood Board had set a limit of \$120 000. McLean only paid two games for the Magpies and Macdonald went broke two years later.

Linnell attempts to tell his story in terms of personalities and to humanise most of the principal figures. He has more success with Alan Schwab, Jack Hamilton and Jim McKay (VFL marketing) than he does with the two major business figures on the VFL (AFL) Commission, Graeme Samuel and Peter Scanlon. This is unfortunate since one of the major insights of *Football Ltd* is the recognition of the major role played by Samuel and Scanlon in transforming Australian football from a community to sport to a sporting business.

Two themes recur throughout Linnell's narrative. The first is that football is a cruel business that destroys those who serve it. The rise and fall of Allen Aylett, Jack Hamilton, Alan Schwab, not to mention various club coaches and presidents, are all presented in this context. The second is that normally sane businessmen behave irrationally and destructively when placed in a position where they see a chance to win a (premiership) flag for their chosen football club.

One of the consequences of the 'inside story' approach is that while Linnell tells some wonderful stories he does not really explain *why* football changed so dramatically in the 1980s. Certainly there is a chapter about the role of television and another on marketing and some cursory reference to the atmosphere of the 1980s, but there is no real attempt to place the changes in the boardrooms of football in any social, political or even economic context. Everything is seen in terms of the individuals involved.

As a result the weakest chapter in an otherwise strong book is the chapter on the Footscray Fightback. This was not a phenomenon that could be explained in terms of individuals although Linnell tries by overemphasising the role of Peter Gordon. It was a community and communal response against the Football corporate planners. The fightback was important because it showed the limitations of Football Ltd, something that I am not sure that Linnell totally appreciates.

Linnell tells the story of the meeting John Elliott called at Mt Macedon in 1984 of selected club presidents where he proposed a breakaway national league. Elliott's breakaway did not happen but later that year the VFL Commission was formed which implemented some of Elliott's proposals and did create a national league. Linnell does not really explain why Elliott's breakaway did not succeed.

But if *Football Ltd* is not a great work of analysis it is a wonderful collection of stories. It is worth buying just to read stories such as Jack

Hamilton being abused by representatives of both CUB and Bond Brewing because the League had granted Fourx rights to advertise on the goalposts during the Fosters Cup, players' agent (now AFL lawyer) Jeff Browne claiming responsibility for 'the trail of blood between Collingwood's Lulie Street and Richmond's Punt Road' (the poaching war that nearly destroyed both clubs), Geoffrey Edelsten telling Bob Pritchard in the middle of the party celebrating their purchase of the Sydney Swans that 'the only problem is I don't have a dime. I have no fucking money whatsoever.' He had just agreed to pay the VFL \$6.5 million!

Football Ltd is required reading for anyone who wants to understand how the VFL became the AFL. We will have to wait for another book to fully explain why the change happened.

Dave Nadel
Monash University National Centre for Australian Studies